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# TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN SCOTLAND

Oliver Escobar

**D**emocracy is always in the making: a never-ending project that requires constant rethinking and development. There are many ways of understanding and practising democracy, and this essay is concerned with those that put citizens at the heart of democratic life.

My hope is that, in Scotland 44, politics will mean more than party politics, elections and media rituals; and democracy will mean more than representative democracy. Reclaiming and recasting politics and democracy is a core challenge for participatory democrats. The key argument is that citizen participation can reinvigorate democratic life by infusing diversity, experience and knowledge into official decision making. The question is what kind of participation.

In representative democracy, citizens are usually given a thin role in public life, and participation often means casting a ballot every few years, and being occasionally invited to inconsequential consultations. It seems unsurprising that most citizens don't grab such opportunities with both hands. Lack of public interest can then be used as an excuse for not supporting citizens to become more involved in governing themselves.

But there are alternative understandings of democracy where participation means direct influence for citizens on the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods. Why citizen participation? Because our current political systems too often struggle to cope with the pressing issues of our time. We need more problem-solving capacity, better policy and

decision making, and new ways of governing. In other words, representative democracy needs a substantial upgrade.

Although there seems to be broad support for democratic principles amongst citizens, there is also growing mistrust in how current institutions work. Representative democracy suffers from low turnouts, political disaffection, public cynicism and loss of legitimacy. As the grandchild of a woman who survived forty years of dictatorship, I'm bound to say the following. The answer to the problems of democracy must surely be more democracy, a more meaningful and engaged kind – a participatory democracy, perhaps.

Well-known forms of participation, including volunteering, voting, organising, campaigning and so on, coexist now alongside those that eschew traditional models of organisational affiliation. For instance, many engage passionately on single issues that matter to them, others are political in how they spend their money and time, yet others work to develop new forms of economic life through cooperatives or social enterprises. All forms of participation can contribute to develop a vibrant democracy, but here I focus on participatory policy-making because I'm interested in how to build public institutions sustained on citizen engagement. Can Scotland 44 be a place where participatory democracy blossoms? My hopeful answer is a qualified yes, though it will require new institutions and practices.

## **Developing institutions**

Current institutions and public bodies were built for a democracy where political representatives, officials and experts are the central players. Consequently, the role of citizens is often reduced to voting periodically and becoming spectators of the party political game. Governing is, from this perspective, the business of certain elites. However, as social problems and policy making grow in complexity, authorities often resort to the

language of ‘collaboration’, ‘partnership’ and ‘community engagement’ searching for new sources of legitimacy, knowledge, and experience.

Unfortunately, opportunities for participation often seem to fall short in ambition, fairness and effectiveness. For instance, official consultations and public meetings typically encompass at least three democratic deficits. Firstly, they lack inclusion and diversity, as they tend to privilege participation by the most vocal and those with higher incomes and education. Secondly, the quality of communication in those spaces is often poor. This means that public conversations can be easily hindered by ritual confrontation, polarising rhetoric, lack of respect for difference, poor listening, and dominant voices – which, again, privileges those most articulate and already engaged. Thirdly, traditional consultation often lacks clear impact on, and connection to, decision making processes.

It is therefore unsurprising that most people ignore such opportunities, while cynicism about public engagement grows. Participatory democracy requires official processes that actually empower citizens through participation. A good example is that of participatory budgeting (PB) in Brazil. PB is a process that involves communities in making decisions about public expenditure. In its original model, PB brings together citizens, activists, officials and political representatives in a series of neighbourhood and strategic assemblies where priorities are discussed and decided, and budgets are co-created before undergoing institutional ratification.

In cities like Porto Alegre, PB became a way of governing, sometimes to the point of allocating 21% of capital expenditure through this process. As a result, PB achieved a remarkable track record in involving thousands of diverse citizens, as well as in addressing problems and inequalities. Indeed, the Porto Alegre case became notorious for its systematic allocation of resources to the poorest. In the last decade, PB has spread globally, with hundreds of experiments particularly in Europe and South America. There are, however, several ways of adapting PB to

different contexts, and not everything that is labelled as PB necessarily reflects the principles of inclusion, empowerment and impact behind the original model.

The challenge is to develop PB processes fit for Scottish contexts without diluting its potential for social change. PB can be transformational but only if it's properly conducted – i.e. when people have a real stake in participating, when it involves a diversity of citizens, when the assemblies are well facilitated, and when officials and politicians work collaboratively with their communities. This can make decision making processes more transparent and legitimate, bring new knowledge (e.g. local, experiential) to bear on complex issues, put critical deliberation at the centre of policy making, and build the confidence and capacity of communities to deal with social problems.

PB is only one of many democratic innovations that are catching the imagination of a new generation of participatory democrats. Another example is that of mini-publics – a family of processes that includes citizens' juries, planning cells, consensus conferences and citizens' assemblies. If PB can involve thousands of citizens every year, mini-publics comprise smaller groups assembled ad-hoc to carry out a particular task within a given timeframe. The premise here is that not everyone can be involved in everything all the time. Scale demands a division of labour in terms of citizen participation. The question is how to ensure that diverse citizens and perspectives are involved in policy making. Mini-publics are one possible response to this challenge.

Mini-publics are forums of citizens, ranging in number from fifteen to several hundred, selected by lot – often through stratified sampling – to reflect the characteristics and perspectives of their population. They seek to represent a microcosm of the public, hence the name mini-public. Their job is usually to produce recommendations to inform decision making on a particular policy or issue. There have been hundreds of mini-publics around the world, both at local and national

level. For instance, they have been used in local planning, health policy, electoral reform and even constitution-making.

Several features make mini-publics unique. Firstly, selection by lot gives everyone an equal chance of participating, while stratified sampling can ensure that a diversity of backgrounds, values and viewpoints are included. Secondly, citizens are compensated for their participation, not only to value their considerable work, but also to level the playing field by removing barriers to participation for those with fewer resources. Thirdly, mini-publics include a learning phase in which participants are exposed to a range of perspectives and evidence on the issue at hand. This is to enable them to engage in informed discussion, aware of the complexity of values, needs and trade-offs at stake. Fourthly, participants take part in facilitated dialogue and deliberation that supports them to explore, consider and discuss viewpoints and options in a respectful way. Trained facilitators are therefore tasked with ensuring that the proceedings are fair and enable everyone to have a voice. Finally, through learning and deliberation that exposes participants to different people and ideas, mini-publics can generate recommendations and decisions based on considered judgement.

Another advantage makes mini-publics appealing at a time of powerful lobbying and undue political influence by private interests. As mini-publics assemble a different group of citizens every time, there is less systemic incentive for protecting the status quo or for encouraging participants to serve particular interests instead of the public good. For this reason, mini-publics may prove valuable for developing policies, and tackling problems, that wouldn't be considered before because of entrenched dynamics that privilege certain groups. In this way, mini-publics can infuse new voices, ideas and knowledges into policy-making, thus unsettling the status quo when needed and building new trust and legitimacy in public institutions.

Nevertheless, as with any democratic innovation, mini-publics

are not exempt from challenges. For instance, to avoid tokenism and manipulation, they must be properly conducted and clearly connected to decision-making processes. Furthermore, they can be expensive and therefore are perhaps better used for issues with high-stakes, competing interests and complex trade-offs – that is, those that would most benefit from citizens’ knowledge, experience and judgement. Finally, to be effective and legitimate, mini-publics cannot be isolated from their broader context. This means that, given the small numbers of participants involved, if mini-publics are to function as trusted proxies for their fellow citizens the media must play a key role in raising awareness, reporting and acting as a watchdog.

Besides the media, PB and mini-publics also depend greatly on the role of political parties and politicians. To develop these new spaces, they must be protected from the logic of partisan, adversarial and competitive politics that seems to dominate representative democracy. The point here is to enable a semi-autonomous sphere for participatory politics. Although elected representatives must play a key role in linking these participatory mechanisms to official decision-making processes, it is important that they don’t see these spaces as yet another arena for party politics. As challenging as it may be, my research so far has persuaded me that participatory politics must be somehow separated and safeguarded from electoral politics. They stem from different logics, incentives and aspirations, and they can achieve complementary aims if properly integrated.

Despite their own unique challenges, these innovations can overcome the problems of inclusion, quality of communication and lack of impact that I earlier argued afflict current public engagement processes. There are many other participatory processes beyond those mentioned here, and indeed Scotland is developing its own. However, I think that PB and mini-publics exemplify the kind of institutional innovation that could revitalise local and national democracy, from Community Planning to

parliamentary proceedings, from NHS local services to national health policies, and from wind farm developments to electoral reform or constitution-making.

Such innovations will require new ways of working by institutions prepared to involve citizens in allocating public expenditure and shaping key policies and decisions. Arguably it's also necessary to get beyond experimental uses and actually institutionalise these kinds of processes so that they are not an occasional add on, but a way of governing that allows ongoing learning and adaptation. The capacity developed through them may then contribute to a vibrant participatory democracy across other public domains.

## **Developing practices**

Participatory democracy is not only about designing new institutional processes, but also developing new mindsets, skills and ways of interacting in society more broadly. Here, I briefly share five thoughts on core practices.

The first one is about widening the palette of communication patterns developed in public conversations. As crucial to democracy as confrontational debate might be, in many situations it can be a limited and limiting way of dealing with policies and problems. Alternative ways of talking are necessary, for instance, dialogue that seeks to build understanding and relationships, or deliberation that engages difference and conflict in an informed, considered and respectful manner. These communication patterns are difficult to develop, but once in motion they can be effective, enriching and contagious.

Secondly, that quality of communication requires facilitation and mediation, which are probably some of the most important skills never taught in our education system. The craft of facilitating meaningful conversations in challenging contexts is crucial to participatory democracy



– from the neighbourhood to the national level, and indeed in the context of the forums proposed earlier. A vibrant democracy needs persuasive rhetoric and animated debate, but it also requires impartial facilitators focussed on the process of helping participants to have those difficult conversations that otherwise wouldn't happen.

Thirdly, conflict and confrontation must be critically understood and approached. Difference and conflict are essential to democracy – their suppression has been the source of much misery for families like mine, who endured the crushing of difference and dissent during Franco's dictatorship in Spain. Therefore, in my view, without respect for difference and the legitimate role of conflict there cannot be democracy. However, this doesn't mean that the best way to deal with conflict is through confrontational communication. The paradox is that this can be counter-productive. Confrontation can accentuate polarisation and entrenchment, which only helps to nurture a vicious circle. Moreover, it prevents deep exploration of differences and conflict, because confrontation often encompasses the simplification of complex matters and the stereotyping of others. As a result, confrontational patterns of communication can become the very thing that prevents us from addressing conflict in meaningful ways. Again, it is precisely here that dialogue approaches and facilitation skills have a lot to offer.

Fourthly, participatory democracy thrives when citizens have opportunities to interact with other citizens who think very differently from them. A danger of current democracy is that many people only get to talk about public issues with like-minded people. Without exposure to the experiences, views, testimonies and values of others there is a risk of fostering polarisation and simplification by dividing communities in silos. In my view, there is a prescient need for hybrid public forums where citizens of all walks of life can encounter a diversity of perspectives and possibilities. There is something important at stake here. It seems easier to dismiss, stereotype or despise a faceless 'other'.

Finally, new institutions and practices will require a new kind of facilitative leadership. If traditional leadership is about having all the answers and pointing the direction, facilitative leadership is about enabling citizens to work out the answers and agree the directions. The facilitative leader is someone who knows how to bring people together to engage in consequential dialogue and deliberation. The ultimate goal of this kind of leader is not notoriety, but to willingly vanish into the self-governing community that she has helped to empower.

## Coda

The proposition here is therefore to reclaim and recast the meaning of politics and democracy, so that new institutions and practices enable citizens to set priorities, make policies, design services and solve problems. I don't see why Scotland 44 couldn't be that kind of democracy.

Often, I hear colleagues justifying lack of public participation on the basis of what I call 'the myth of apathy'. Citizens are not interested in policy making, they argue, and therefore the business of politics and democracy is best left to certain elites. From this perspective, publics are apathetic, which renders public engagement worthless. In my view, however, this ignores that apathy is not simply a natural occurrence but actually takes considerable work to produce. There is nothing apathetic about the millions that every year spend time volunteering, campaigning, organising, demonstrating and so on. Therefore, when citizens seem apathetic about engaging with certain processes and institutions it is important to ask: how is this apathy being generated? Who benefits from the sustained fabrication of apathy? In my view, the current failures in public engagement stem from the kind of citizen that citizens are invited to be – typically a spectator or a complainer.

I also often hear invocations of the dangers of listening to the 'ignorant', 'misinformed' or 'irrational' public. But that image does not

resonate with the experience of the hundreds of participation practitioners, facilitators and citizens that I have worked with over the years, nor is it backed by evidence from decades of experimentation with participatory forums. Citizens, when given the time, space and resources to learn and participate, are more than capable of engaging in meaningful deliberation about complex issues and reaching considered judgements. It may be that, in Scotland 44, generalisations about citizens or publics as being ignorant or incapable will be as unacceptable as when those labels were applied to women or ethnic minorities.

But let's not be mistaken. Democracy and politics are about power, and the status quo is often firmly anchored. Participatory democracy won't simply happen in a world where power tends to be centralised or deceitfully hidden. These democratic innovations require a robust and independent third sector – including non-profits, community organisations, campaigning groups, civic networks and so on – capable of putting pressure on governments and public bodies to open up new democratic spaces for participatory politics. It is worth concluding by noting that the ideas shared in this essay are not utopian. For most of them, there have now been decades of experimenting and learning. It seems time to move on and institutionalise some of these innovations so that they can have a real chance of impact on the distribution of power and the tackling of problems and inequalities.

Democracy is a hard-won, fragile achievement, as I learned growing up in a young democracy. But democracy must also be developed to meet the aspirations of their citizens, as I have learned spending adulthood in an old democratic system. For all its problems, the promise of democracy is that it can contain and nurture the seeds for its reinvention.